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Of bleeding skulls and the postcolonial uncanny: bones and the presence of Nonosabasut and Demasduit

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Abstract

Based upon three years of fieldwork in Newfoundland and the UK, this paper considers the various materialisations of a Beothuk man and woman, all of which have, at their heart, the skull as an ambivalent thing, at once a trace of their presence and a confirmation of their absence. These various processes of materialisation are, it will be argued, attempts to arrest the ambivalent movement between presence and absence, yet are themselves haunted by the thing itself, which is both insufficient to, yet in excess of, these materialisations. In so doing it engages with broader questions of the nature of *affective presence* of human remains, particularly in the context of the postcolonial politic of belonging in settler societies.

Keywords: Bones, presence, post-colonial, Newfoundland, Beothuk

Introduction

This paper is about two skulls, which now reside in the stores of the National Museum of Scotland, and a man and a woman, named Nonosabasut and Demasduit, whose skull these are (or were). The problem, which in various ways will occupy the remainder of this discussion, is how one relates to the other, that is: how do the two skulls relate to the man and the woman, and

how do the man and the woman relate to the two skulls, and how do we, living almost two hundred years after their death, know or feel the presence of Nonosabasut and Demasduit in our communion with their remains.

This is problem of the presence (and absence) of the past. Cast in specific ethnographic terms, the question is how, if all, are Nonosabasut and Demasduit still present, if not as a living people then at least as some kind of “haunting trace” (O’Riley 2008: 4) of the colonial history of Newfoundland? Cast in more general theoretical terms, this is a question of how, to quote Eelco Runia, “the living-on of the past in the here and now can be envisaged”? (2006a: 14) Put another way, this could be a question of memory and how it is we may remember events of the past and, in particular, events which lie beyond the compass of our own embodied experience. Whether ethnographic or theoretical, the question of the presence of the past and our memories of lives gone before is articulated in tension between the ways in which we the living narrate and commemorate past events, the material traces of the past (including skulls) and the “real” or “actual” events that took place some time ago.

Accordingly, to explore the question, both specific and general, of how the past “lives on” in the skulls of Nonosabasut and Demasduit, this paper will be in three parts. In the first part I will tell the story of the life death of Nonosabasut and Demasduit. This is, of course and in fact, a retelling, as this story has been told and told again, though its origins find their way back to a number of sources which come near to events of the time (in as much as all claim to have witnessed the events). In the second I will consider the “matter of bones” by reflecting on a visit to the skulls that now sit in the stores of the

National Museum of Scotland. Thirdly and finally, I will conclude by considering the ways in which the violent events of almost two centuries ago may (or may not) “live on” in contemporary Newfoundland. In so doing, I will raise, though maybe not resolve, the question of whether this “living on”, this experience of affective presence of the past, is all in our heads, that is a matter of encultured consciousness, or somehow exists and subsists in the material traces of the past, be they a green overgrown gully or an old tobacco-coloured skull.

Nonosabasut and Demasduit: their life death and afterlife

The Beothuk

Nonosabasut and Demasduit were Beothuk. The Beothuk were a native people of the island of Newfoundland, which now, along with adjoining mainland territory of Labrador, is the tenth province of Canada. They were hunter-gatherers. They moved with the seasons, travelling from the interior to the shore in the spring where they would catch whitefish and salmon, pick mussels and hunt seals, then returning to the shelter of the forest in the autumn when they would hunt migrating caribou. From the little we know we think they were an Algonquin speaking people, and so related culturally and maybe genetically to the northern hunter gatherers of the eastern mainland, although there were clear differences in their material culture and in their language that mark the Beothuk out as a distinct people. (Howley 1915; Marshall 1998; Pastore 1993)

Towards the close of the eighteenth century English and Irish fishers began to settle the eastern and northern coasts of Newfoundland. They

settled along the shores of Conception Bay and then, as more people came, they moved northward and westward to settle along the coasts of Trinity, Bonavista and Notre Dame Bays. So the Europeans came to live where the Beothuk lived, occupying the bights and bays where the natives fished, hunted and gathered eggs. (Pastore 1989) The two people did not get along. The “vigorous and warlike” (Harvey 1894:10) Beothuk avoided all contact with the settlers, save acts of theft. The “rude trappers, hunters and fishermen” (Harvey 1894: 10) responded with violent reprisals and acts of wanton cruelty. (Rowe 1977; Upton 1977)

With the coming of the settlers the Beothuk population dwindled rapidly. Some were shot, more died of tuberculosis, others died of starvation. In 1823 it was estimated there was only thirteen were living. (Howley 1915: 229) On the sixth of June, 1829, a woman named Shanadithit died in the hospital in St. John’s. An obituary in the *London Times*, “supposed” that she “was the last of the Beothicks”. (Howley 1915: 231-232)

The story of Nonosabasut and Demasduit is, then, just one story of death and violence amongst many. Actually, this is not quite right. It is likely the best known and most detailed of these stories. The rest, and there are many (Upton 1977; Marshall 1989), circulate in the manner of rumours and secrets, being a bit shadowy in the specifics of names and places and who did what and whether things really unfolded as the story describes. But in the case of Nonosabasut and Demasduit we have no less than four eye-witness accounts of his death and her kidnap. Three were told by white men, two by the same man. The first was told by John Peyton Jr. before a court in St. John’s, the second written as a letter to the editor of the *Liverpool Mercury* by

a man known only by his initials, and the last told again by John Peyton Jr., but now much older, to James Howley. (Marshall 1996: 160-166; Howley 1915: 91-108) The final account was related by Nonosabasut's niece, Shanawdithit, to William Epps Cormack, a man who figures largely in the curious afterlife of Nonosabasut and Demasduit's remains. (Howley 1915: 240-241)

It is from Shanadithit we know a little of their lives before his murder and her kidnap. We know the name by which their people knew them and by which they are now remembered (though sometimes Demasduit is still known by the name her European captors gave her, "Mary March"). We know that they were married and that a few days before the events to be described Demasduit had given birth to their first child. (Howley 1915: 227-229) We know that Nonosabasut was esteemed by his people as a "powerful leader and hunter" (McGregor 1856: 323) and that he was also likely one of a party of a Beothuk who, in September 1818, stole up to the premises of John Peyton Sr., at Lower Sandy Point on the Bay of Exploits, and by night cut loose "a large boat" which that very day had been loaded with salmon. The boat was discovered later the next day, ruined and plundered. The rest of their story begins on the ice of Red Indian Lake.

The Death of Nonosabasut and the kidnap of Demasduit

The story goes something like this: irked by the loss of his boat, as well as other attacks on his property, and seeking redress or at least the recovery of some of his goods, John Peyton Sr. assembled a party of men, fishers and furriers working in his service as well as his son, John Jr. In March of 1819 they left Lower Sandy Point and followed the course of frozen rivers inland

towards Red Indian Lake, where they knew the Beothuk made their winter camps.

They came to the lake in twilight and knew the Beothuk to be close from three columns of smoke rising from the opposite shore. The men waited the night through, fire-less and blanket-wrapped, in a snow-filled gully. They awoke as “the first glimpse of morn showed itself in the light clouds, floating on the Eastern horizon” (Howley 1915: 98). A cold breakfast was had and when that was done the men set out upon the ice walking towards the place where they had espied the three columns of smoke.

Here things get a little confused. This is, after all, a story which is based on four other stories and, even those these are all told by people who were there, they differ in their particulars. In part, one could surmise, they differ in their particulars because this is a story of murder. Indeed the events of the day lead to a murder trial in St. John’s, from which all were found innocent by reason of self-defence. It would stand to reason, therefore, that, given the questions of guilt and innocence that pertain to what happened on that day, the accounts would vary, in particular concerning who attacked whom and how.

They all agree that by the afternoon the Beothuk, maybe fourteen, maybe more, were running and the Englishmen were running after them. Demasduit was falling behind and the younger Peyton threw off his heavy jacket and made after her. When he was near catching her she fell to her knees and pulled open her deerskin coat to show she was a woman. He threw his gun aside, to show he meant her no harm, and “laid hold of her” (Howley 1915: 93), or maybe she laid her hand is his, and began leading her away.

Then Nonosabasut, described as a “powerful looking fellow” (Howley 1915: 93), came up to them. Maybe he came running, brandishing an axe. (Howley 1915: 93) Maybe he came walking with a spruce bow held aloft. (Howley 1915: 99) Maybe there were words, an oration the English couldn’t understand. Maybe he shook hands with everyone. (Howley 1915: 99) Maybe he attacked the party, with his hands, with a knife, with a gun. The details of what happens bend, twist and fracture. There was an axe. Was an axe held aloft in violence? Was it discovered hidden beneath the Beothuk man’s coat and taken from him? Was it presented, all polished and gleaming, to John Junior? Shots were fired. We know that. How many and by whom, well, that’s disputed. But shots were fired and the man fell and died upon the ice.

The woman was silent. But then, as she was pulled away from the body, “she vented her sorrow in the most heart-breaking lamentations”. (Howley 1915:100) Peyton and his men covered the body with boughs and set about ransacking the abandoned mameteeks looking for stolen goods. They found kettles and axes, fish-hooks and knives and Mr. Peyton’s watch all in pieces, the bits strung on deerskin thongs. They carried away with them what they could and was still useful. And they led away the woman, tied securely, for they hoped “that by kind treatment and civilization she might, in the course of time, be returned to her tribe, and by means of effecting a lasting reconciliation between them and the settlers”. (Howley 1915: 101)

The Bones of Nonosabasut and Demasduit

Sometime after his death the Beothuk must have returned. On site of Nonosabasut’s mameteek they built a small “hut, ten feet high in length and breath nine to ten”, the roof “covered in the rind of trees”. (Cormack 1829:

321) There they laid his body, sown into a shroud of deer skins. Beside him was the body of a child, likely his own.

A year or so later the body of Demasduit, also wrapped in deer skin, was laid beside that of her husband. She had died of tuberculosis aboard a ship moored in the Bay of Exploits, whilst awaiting a reunion with her people. Despite her death the reunion went ahead. Lieutenant David Buchan and his men set off for the interior on the 21st of January, 1820, again following the routes of frozen rivers and streams inland, dragging the body of Demasduit, all wrapped in white cloth and laid in a coffin “neatly made and handsomely covered with red clothe ornamented with copper trimmings and breastplate”. (Howley 1915: 123) They had a hard going of it, with deep snow, frost and thin slushy ice. Two weeks more it took them to reach Red Indian Lake. There they found the little wooden hut, “of curious construction” (Howley 1915: 123) in which lay the body of Nonosabasut.

They built a little tent by the hut and in it they suspended the coffin some six feet from the ground. In the tent placed all manners of goods, “such as are considered of use and interest to Native Indians” and made the whole construction safe and secure against the winter weather. It seemed to Captain Buchan, as they made ready to abandon the body of Demasduit, that her “corpse, which was carefully secured and decorated with all the many trinkets that had been presented to her, was in a perfect state, and so little was the change in features that the imagination would fancy life not yet extinct”. (Howley 1915: 123)

According to Shanadithit, the Beothuk returned three days later. They first cracked open “the coffin with hatchets and took out the clothes etc.”

(Marshall 1996: 180) They then left the coffin suspended for a month before dropping it to the ground. Two months later they removed the body of Demasduit and laid it beside that of her husband and child.

They did not, however, lie in peace. Seven years passed then, in October of 1827, another white man came to Red Indian Lake. He travelled light by comparison, being the company of only three native guides, rather than fifty marines. It was William Epps Cormack, he who was soon to write down Shanawdithit's recollection of these events. He was a Scottish merchant, based in St. John's. He was also an amateur natural historian and possessed of profound and sympathetic interest in the welfare of the Beothuk. He had made the journey to Red Indian Lake under the auspices of the newly formed Beothuk Institution (of which he President and Treasurer) with a view to "opening communication with and promoting the civilisation of Red Indians of Newfoundland". (Howley 1915: 184)

He and the three native guides wandered by the shores of Red Indian Lake and all they found were traces of the people now gone: deer fences forsaken and decaying, wigwams in ruins, the wreck of a birch-bark canoe. They found a square hut. They opened the hut. Inside they found a white wooden coffin and inside the white wooden coffin they found a skeleton, wrapped round in white muslin. They also found the skeleton of man laid full length upon the floor, his bones wrapped in deerskin. There were other things two. Two small wooden images of a man and a woman, which Cormack took to be representations of the husband and wife whose bones he found. There was also a doll, which he supposed represented the child, and an iron axe,

several small models of canoes, a bow and a quiver of arrows and lumps of iron pyrite that lay by the head of the man. All these he took. (Cormack 1829)

He also took the two skulls from the skeletons. He took these and packed them away. That night they camped amidst the ruins. His native guides “evinced uneasiness and want of confidence in things around” for, as Cormack conjectures, “they thought themselves usurpers on Red Indian territory”. (Cormack 1829: 322) They made their way back to the coast and Cormack went on to St. John’s. The skulls and grave goods also made an onward journey to Edinburgh where they became part of the collection University Museum in Edinburgh, much of which, including the skulls and grave goods, were incorporated into the collections of the National Museum of Scotland.

The odd thing is that Cormack, though he wrote a detailed account of his expedition, never reported the fact that he took the skulls. There is little doubt that the skulls do indeed come from him and were collected on his visit to Red Indian Lake in October of 1827. We know that Cormack had been a student of Robert Jameson, professor of natural history in Edinburgh and the curator of the University Museum. An entry in the Museum’s day book, dated March 15, 1828, reads, “Mr Cormack brought from Newfoundland: 1) skull of male Red Indian, 2) skull of female Red Indian.” The record book of the Wernarian Society of Edinburgh, of which Prof. Jameson was president, reports that in the same month “two skulls, male and female, of the Red Indians of Newfoundland sent home by Mr. Cormack were also exhibited” at a meeting of the society. (Black, Marshall et. al. 2009: 661) Finally, Cormack’s name appears written across the forehead of the skull of Nonosabasut.

Nonetheless, it is maybe a little queer that Cormack himself never described himself talking the skulls.

Seeing the Skulls

Going to Granton

In autumn of 2008, I arranged to visit the two skulls. The skulls were, and still are, sitting neatly packed into cardboard boxes in the stores of National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh. I had secured permission to visit the skulls from Andrew Kitchener, the keeper of natural history at the museum, and on the day we travelled together by taxi away from city centre, northward past petrol stations and parks, pebbledash houses, and rundown convenience stores, out to Granton, where the Firth of Forth washes greyly against the neglected fringes of the city.

We passed through the gates, signed in at security, climbed some stairs and came to a big cold windowless store room of tables and rows of shelves that reached from floor high up to the ceiling, well beyond unclad reach. On these shelves were hundreds upon hundreds of cardboard boxes, plain and brown. The keeper pulled two of boxes from the shelves and brought them to a small table, next to the skeleton of what seemed a baby whale. He opened the boxes, unpacked some grey foam, then gently removed the two skulls, one then the other, and placed them on the table. He left me to look at the skulls. After all that is what I had asked his permission to do: to “see” the skulls. So I looked, first at a distance, then, bending at the waist, looking more closely in a somewhat self-conscious pose of close study.

Self-consciousness was perhaps the foremost and defining feature of this experience. The fact was I didn't really know what to look at, or what I hoped to see or feel by having these two skulls unpacked and laid before my gaze. There are people who could see things by looking closely at bones, forensic anthropologists and the like. They can read the bones as it were, finding in little features of the skull some attribute of the living fleshed person. I had talked to Sue Black, a forensic anthropologist at the University of Dundee, who had looked the bigger of the two skulls, albeit more closely than I. She could see, in the prominent brow ridges and the wide jaw, the "beautiful" face of a "big butch man", that had been Nonosabasut. But I could see no such thing. Not the face of a "big butch man" or his more delicate wife or anything else for that matter except the most plainly obvious features.

One was bigger than the other. The smaller one was missing its jaw (and therefore technically was not a skull but a cranium). The bigger of the two was much darker, almost tobacco coloured, than the smaller. And really that was about it. Except for the teeth. The skull still had a few teeth left, yellowed and worn, and these struck me. I don't know why exactly, but when interviewed a day later about my feelings on visiting the skulls, I said that maybe it was that I could recognise these as part of a living person, as part of myself even. The skull itself approximated the geography of a living face – the mouth as the gap between the mandible and the cranium, the holes where a nose and eyes were – but it was somehow also other, alien. But the teeth – they could have belonged in the mouth of someone still living, my mouth, your mouth. Maybe the fact I had been to the dentist a few days before, after spending a week running my tongue across a hole in one of my molars, had

made me more conscious of this mostly neglected part of my body. But besides the teeth, well, really for me, untrained in osteology as I am, there was not much to see. I stood longer than I really needed to, more out of politeness to my host than anything and, I suppose, the wish to seem like I was studying the skulls and so validating the trip and my status as an academic doing research.

All of this begs two questions. The first is why I bothered to visit the skulls at all, if there was nothing I could learn from the visit, or at least nothing that couldn't be better learned from those who have the ability to see and describe the nature of these objects with greater precision. The second is why I took so long in deciding to see them. I had known the skulls were there for two or three years at least. In a sense I had been circling them. I had been talking to people who had talked to me of the skulls: people who were concerned with their whereabouts and well-being, people who wondered at what hidden truths lay within their form and substance, people who tried to bring this hidden truth to the surface, measuring and drilling, writing and modelling, working in various ways to move deeper into, but also away from, the skulls and so return as near as possible to the living person whose being somehow inhered in but was also effaced by these two bits of bone which resided in cardboard boxes on metal shelves in a building in Granton. I had known they were there, sure they were local, and yet for two years or more I deferred actually asking to see them. Even after I talked with the keepers of the National Museum of Scotland about my research and their thoughts about skulls it took me the best part of year to make the request to visit the skulls themselves.

The mute materiality of bone

In a way the keeper of the skulls answered these questions on the day of the trip to Granton. While we were sitting in the back of the taxi he told me that most people who wanted to see the skulls were not interested in the bones themselves. It was the story around and behind the bones, the tragic tale of the murder of Nonosabasut and the kidnap of Demasduit, which drew them to visit the museum stores. In these words (or words to that effect) he summarises the tension that lay at the heart of my ambivalence towards the presence of the skulls and the deferral of my visit. Given a theoretical spin, it could also be that the keeper's somewhat caustic comment may describe a more general ambivalence and deferral that lies at the heart of the ways in which social and cultural scientists deal with the presence of bones specifically, and human remains more generally.

Simply put, Andrew was right. As a socio-cultural anthropologist engaged in the study of how the people of contemporary Newfoundland remember the Beothuk, I was interested what living people said about the past. Stuff was enfolded into these accounts – trees, rocks, water, a long rifle and bones – but in itself this stuff was, to me, inert, mute, opaque and came alive only as it was caught up in stories written or spoken. In this sense, my research was very much in keeping with a tradition of scholarship which, as Christopher Tilley argues, prefers to study the content and techniques of representation, rather than our active and unfolding dynamic and sensuous encounters with places and landscapes (or, for that matter, bones). (Tilley and Bennett 2004: 16)

For example, north of Millertown, on the shores of Red Indian Lake, I pushed through a dense little thicket of brush in the company Albert Taylor (this was back in the summer of 2007). We stopped at the edge of little gully all green and overgrown so as you could not see the stream that ran at the bottom. Here, said Albert, was where “John Peyton forced his men to sleep in the snow without lighting a fire”. The men all wet and cold stayed in this gully, “complaining like hell”, before getting up before dawn and, in Albert’s words, “proceeded up the lake to surprise the Beothuk”.



Wooded gully near Millertown, 2007

So in his words this gully, which was much like many other densely overgrown little gullies running into the ponds and lakes of the Newfoundland interior, become meaningful as part of a story of murder and kidnap related above, but the gully itself had little to do with this (though in another sense it had everything to do with this). It did not speak this story or call it forth. This story came with Albert Taylor, who done the work of fitting written accounts of

long ago events onto the familiar landscape of his childhood. For me what was interesting and accessible was this narrational work of making the landscape meaningful and so resonant with historical incident.

Cast in slightly more philosophical terms one could say, following Rom Harré, that what interested me is how “stuff” is transformed into a “social object” through the process of narration (2002). The stuff-ness of stuff is not strictly immaterial to this process, but in general the materiality of stuff appears vaguely as a phenomenal precondition to the cultural work of narration by which objects are constituted. At the most there is the possibility that the “material attributes” of things, “may constrain the uses to which things can be put in local social narratives”. (Harré 2002: 31) So, I guess that Albert’s story needed a gully and not a broken up old cast iron stove (that was another story from the same walk) because, as the story went, Peyton and his men sheltered in a gully and, if one wishes to extend this point a bit further, one could argue that the gully-ness of the gully was important to this story because it afforded some semblance of shelter back on a winter’s night in the beginning of the 19th century.

This, I would assert, is what we, as socio-cultural anthropologists, do with bones. As Katherine Verdery argues when addressing the lively political careers of dead bodies in post-socialist Eastern Europe, “bones corpses, coffins and cremation urns ... are indisputably there, as our senses of sight, touch and smell can confirm”. (1999:27) This *thereness*, this substantial sensory presence, often glossed somewhat vaguely as *materiality*, “can”, in Verdery’s words, “be critical to its symbolic efficacy” for “bodies have the advantage of concreteness that nonetheless transcends time, making the past

immediately present". (Verdery 1999: 27) However, as the example of a superabundance of relics of St. Francis shows,

the significance of corpses has less to do with their concreteness than how people think about them. A dead body is not meaningful in itself but through culturally established relations to death and through the way a specific dead person's importance is variously constructed. (Verdery 1999: 28)

The important thing is, therefore, not the skulls themselves. Perhaps one could argue that the skulls need to be there, or somewhere, for all this other stuff to happen – all the talk and politics and science and conjecture. Maybe even there is something in their curious quality of skull-ness, some kind of recognisable human-ness in their form that makes them peculiarly "good to think with" (as oppose to, say, a femur which rarely excites such popular attention), but it's the thinking, or to be more precise the speaking and writing, that counts and works to fill the otherwise "dry bones" with meaning. (Weingrod 1995)

Such a view certainly comfortably conforms to my methodological, and likely too my theoretical, disposition. Finally, there was, and is, not much I can do with the things of the world, be they densely wooded gullies or skulls, other than note their presence, their *thereness*, and acknowledge that material fact of their being is somehow important. It is what people do with this stuff representationally, all the walking, talking and writing, modelling and film-making, that is the true object of my study, the sensible surface which I can engage with, interpret, decode and deconstruct. Things – the skulls sitting in a cardboard box on a metal shelf in a storehouse in Granton – are devoid of any

real sense except the simple fact of their sitting there, occupying space interrupting my gaze, and the sense we or others make of them when we even remember that they are there.

This was the case with my own work. I went around talking to people about the skulls, archaeologists and forensic anthropologists, historians, filmmakers, novelists, keepers, curators, a primary-school teacher, a high-school student and so on and so on. I read scholarly papers and novels. I attended plaque dedication ceremonies where pleas were made for the return of the skulls to their native land. In all this the skulls were there like ghosts or maybe shadows: a vague outline of presence which, when you turn around, is gone or maybe never was except as a trick of the light. So it seemed and seems that Vedery is correct: really what is important are not the skulls but the *idea* of the skulls; the layers of representation that had built up around these slight things much like the grey foam that keeps them snug and safe and hidden in their cardboard box.

The fact is that very few I talked with had actually seen the skulls themselves, though they had much to say about them. Even more appealingly, for those a tricksterish postmodern disposition, there were more encounters with “fake” skulls than “real”. I spoke with Richard Neave, who had reconstructed the face of the deceased from the larger of the two skulls, and it turned out he never touched or saw the real skull but worked from a plastic model (a rather inferior plastic model in his estimation) created from a three-dimensional scan of the real skull. I talked to a primary-school teacher, Anne Warr, whose students became so incensed at the displacement of the skulls that they raised a petition and sent it off to Scotland. On her retirement her

colleagues presented her with two plastic skulls and the children asked her whether they were real, whether indeed the petition moved the people of Scotland to package the bones and ship them to Grand Falls. I talked to another Grand Falls man, Grant Tucker, who had created something of a reconstructed village (later destroyed by a hard winter), which included a burial site complete with plastic skulls, which, the light being dim and the effect compelling, many visitors took to be real.

So it goes. The substantial being of the skulls of Nonosabasut and Demasduit seems endlessly deferred, until they become a simulacrum in the Baudrillardian sense (Baudrillard 2001 [1981]: 173): scanned and made into an image, the image made in a model, the model worked into a face, the face appearing in a documentary film, the documentary film shown at an interpretation centre, exciting a bit of local concern about the alienation of these remains from their native land, and so more petitions raised and posted and replies posted back and on it goes, until maybe things calm down and the whole matter is forgotten. All of this theoretically made possible by the presence of the skulls, but the fact of that presence recedes to the point of vanishing, leaving me, quite contented as a socio-cultural anthropologist, simply working with words and images, like the map that overlies a landscape that has long since rotted away.

Returning to things (and visiting skulls)

Recently, however, there have been those who have not been so happy about our neglect of things in preference to words. Tim Ingold, of course, has persistently reminded us the material world of gullies and bones is not just some blank “*tablua rasa*” which we conscious beings make “meaningful”

according to our cultural dispositions; rather, we “discover meaningful objects in the environment by moving about in it” (1992: 47) and our cultural dispositions, the shared languages by which recognise things as objects, are emergent from and enfolded into the embodied physicality of perception. (Ingold 2000; Tilley & Bennett 2004)

Others have advocated a “return to things” (Olson 2003, Domańska 2005), arguing, like Ingold, against the theoretical excesses of constructivism and a prevailing “representationalist epistemology” (Ihde 2003: 10-11), and advocating a more “egalitarian” or “symmetrical” (Webmoor 2007) conceptualisation of social life which proceeds from the premise that “all those physical entities we refer to as material culture, are beings in the world alongside other beings, such as plants, humans and animals”. (Olsen 2003: 88) This recognition of the “agency” (Gell 1998; Williams 2004; Knappett & Malafouris 2008) or “force” (Bennett 2005) of things does not seek to redress the seeming imbalance between subjects and objects by asserting, in the manner of cultural materialism (Harris 1979; Adams 1981), the irreducibility of matter as a “given” (or set of givens) which directs and delimits the work of culture. In contrast, “thing” theorists (Brown 2001) emphasise non-deterministic “onflow” (Thrift 2007: 5) of everyday life, the complex affective entanglements between various entities and the open processes of becoming by which objects and subjects emerge and hold, with a lesser or greater degree of durability and stability, themselves distinct from and related to one another. (Halewood 2005)

There is, amidst all this finely wrought theorising, something romantic, even nostalgic, in the evocation of “things” – be they damp stones (Ingold

2007), a dead rat and a bottle cap (Bennett 2005), or a dirty pane of glass (Brown 2001). Bill Brown writes of the beguiling promise of things as “something warm ... that relieves us from the chill of dogged ideation, something concrete that relieves us from unnecessary abstraction”. (2001: 1) Olson strikes a similar note when, responding to Marx’s oft quoted description of the modern condition, he insists that “all is solid has not melted into air” (2003: 88), and that in the “mundane trivia of the practical world” (2003:100) we find a terrain of existence, which, even as it is neglected and abased in our scholarship, offers us the possibility of realising a being that is not simply the shadow of language. The “comfort” of things, therefore, as Peter Schwenger theorises, lies in a longing for “an anterior state of things” (2006: 3) and a “nostalgia” for this “prior state” (2006: 5) in which we have not been formed as conscious subjects but live as sensuous beings-in-the-world.

This, Nigel Thrift argues, is a longing for a “presence which escapes a conscious-centred core of self-reference”. (2007: 5) In a similar vein, Runia, writes of the “need for presence”, as a desire to be “in touch with people, things, events, and feelings that have made you into the person you are”. (2006b: 5) For Runia our desire to, both literally and figuratively, “be in touch” with the past in our communion with the material traces of past lives – be they the small everyday objects on display in a living museum (De Certeau 1984: 21) or the detritus of an abandoned factory (Edensor 2005a) – is not a desire for “meaning”; rather it is desire for *affect*, to somehow feel both the presence and absence of those who have been but are no longer; to, in other words and to quote Runia, “share in the awesome reality of a people, things, events and feelings, coupled to a vertiginous urge to taste the fact that awesomely

real people, thing, events, and feelings can awesomely suddenly cease to exist". (2006a: 5)

So it was that I visited the skulls. Not because they "meant" something, but because I wanted to *feel* something. That something was, and in this Runia certainly seems right, a "presence" of a sort. I wanted to feel the presence of the people whose skulls these were (or are), and their story, not as it had been told and told again, but as it had been lived. I wanted to get beyond all the words and simulations, the petitions, speeches, poems and novels, the fake plastic skulls and the stories of fake plastic skulls, and in the thingyness of bone experience the uncanny closeness and the melancholic distance of the past. In short, I wished to make a "return to things".

This is, however, a curious kind of presence. I had asked, after all, to "see" the skulls. In some strands of thinking concerned with the nature of perception (Matthen 2005; Raftopoulos 2009) it would seem that what was at stake was an experience of the presence of these the skulls, an experience which is "a matter of objects being visually locatable relative to the perceiver". (Matthen 2009: 29) But this was not solely and wholly the case. I wanted to feel the presence of the skulls sure enough, but I also wanted to feel the presence of something else, something which, to paraphrase Brown, "remains physically and metaphysically irreducible to objects". (2001: 5) It is this quality of presence that Tim Edensor describes when he writes of the ghosts of ruins, as "an imaginative empathetic recouping of the characters, forms of communication and activities" of past lives (2005b: 842) that we feel amongst the detritus and in the shadowed unregulated spaces of modern existence. This sense of presence that is at once in things yet is also behind or before

them, and so is never wholly materialised in the object. In brief, I wanted to feel the presence of Nonosabasut and Demasduit in seeing their skulls.

The question is in what sense, if any, Nonosabasut and Demasduit present in my seeing their skulls? This is not simply a question peculiar to my own experience or disposition. During my time talking to people in Newfoundland many spoke of *feeling* the presence of the Beothuk, in the change in the light as a storm is coming on, in the sound of snow falling on needles of spruce trees, in the bones of caribou found on a beach or indeed the skull of a man in a cardboard box. So, more generally, this is a question of how the presence of the past is experienced in our sensuous communion with things and how this presence may relate to articulations of identity in the postcolonial milieu.

The Presence of Absence and Haunted Histories

Postcolonial Haunting

The story of Nonosabasut and Demasduit and their skulls is famous in Newfoundland. It has been told many times and in many different ways. There are histories, both popular and more academic, which promise to give as clear and truthful account of what really happened as the various contradictory narratives will allow. There is also a feature film based on the events that took place on Red Indian Lake (Pittman 1988), as well as two documentaries (Pittman 1982; Wolochatiuk 2006), a goodly number of poems and several novels (Such 1973; Crummey 2003; Morgan 2007).

One of these novels, *All Gone Widdun* (1999), is written by Annemarie Beckel. In it Beckel takes the novelist's privilege of getting inside the head of

her characters, including William Epps Cormack. She describes a man racked with guilt, torn between his duty as a dispassionate collector of scientific curiosities and a deep, if confused, compassion for the Beothuk. Alone in the “spirit house” he “slit open the shroud” that covered “Mary’s” body, “and stared for a moment at the skull’s empty eyes, the long braid, still black and glossy.” (1999: 102) Then, though he “felt some reluctance to disturb the skeletons any further”, he lifted the skull from the body. That night the fictional Cormack “fell into a restless sleep, shifting between wakefulness and slumber.” In his tormented sleep he once again lifts the skull from its resting place.

I dreamed the white coffin lay in the lodge where I slept. I saw myself rise from my blanket, open the lid, and lift Mary’s skull from its muslin shroud.

Someone watched from the shadows. Dark eyes in an ancient face.

Bright blood spurted from the skull’s grinning mouth, streamed down the alabaster chin, and dripped through my fingers. I dropped the skull, raised my blood covered hands and screamed.
(1999: 114)

I introduce this dream of the fictional Cormack for two reasons. The first is that is a fine example of “postcolonial haunting” or the “postcolonial uncanny”, which, it has been shown, is a persistent theme in recent fiction of Canada and other settler societies. (Goldman & Saul 2006; Gelder and Jacobs 1998; Gordon 1997)

Following a broadly Freudian analytic, various cultural and literary theorists have diagnosed the “postcolonial uncanny” as a condition (whose

symptoms are mostly expressed in writing) in which the familiar “homely” space of the nation is haunted by the ghost of an “other”, whose presence has been (often violently) repressed yet who returns to disrupt the temporality and territoriality of the national imaginary. Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs make this point when considering the proliferation of aboriginal ghosts in Australian literature, stating that “we often speak of Australia as a settler nation – but the ‘uncanny’ can remind us that a condition of unsettledness folds into this often taken-for-granted mode of occupation.” (1999: 182) Warren Cariou argues that the same condition of unsettledness pervades the Canadian Prairie, which is haunted by “a lurking sense that the place settlers call home is not really theirs and a sense that their current legitimacy as owners and renters in a capitalist land market might well be predicated on theft, fraud, violence and other injustices in the past.” (2006: 727-8)

The key to this is the notion of “a lurking sense”. The postcolonial uncanny is describes a quality of affective presence that somehow elides, and therefore disrupts, the normative narratives of national remembrance and rituals of commemoration by which the past is made present. It suggests that there is a space that is before or beyond this narration – a collective subconscious where lurks forgotten acts of colonial violence and dispossession that were foundational to the becoming of the postcolonial nation. These acts return to us as ghosts and dreams, or, more broadly, a sense of presence, which one man from the Bay of Exploits described to me as a “fear that’s not quite a fear” that he sometimes felt when hunting rabbits alone in the autumn woods around Red Indian Lake.

The second reason for reflecting on this passage from *All Gone Widdun* is that this sense of presence that haunts Cormack, and by extension Newfoundland, is intimately connected with the skulls of Nonosabasut and Demasduit, and, more generally, their bodily substances: hair, bone and blood. This, rather neatly, is expressed in two linked juxtapositions of living and dead matter, one experienced whilst awake and the other whilst dreaming.

In taking the skull of Demasduit the fictional Cormack is described as first staring at the skull, whose eye sockets are empty, devoid of life. Then he looks at the long braid of her hair which is “still black and glossy” as if still part of a living body (curiously echoing Buchan observation that the body of Demasduit was so well preserved that one could “fancy life not yet extinct life”). In taking the skull Cormack renders it a dead object, a specimen, “just a thing” as the keeper said to me as we left the stores of the National Museum of Scotland. In his dream, however, this dead object becomes animate as blood flows from the mouth, down the alabaster chin and onto his hands. Moreover, as the blood flows he also senses a presence, someone “watching from the shadows”: “dark eyes in an ancient face”.

This fictional dream of the animation of “dead” matter is, I would argue, a dream that describes how the materiality of human remains is enfolded into a politic of the postcolonial uncanny. The presence of the bone, the skull, dry and mineral in its constitution, is a denial or deferral of the living presence of Beothuk. Yet it also holds within it that living presence, a presence that can be pulled out or drawn forth, like blood flowing from fleshless jaws, until the bones are made to “speak” and we come to recognise, or at least be haunted

by, the living presence of Nonosabasut and Demasduit. In Beckel's novel this is a dream, which is clearly distinguished from the waking reality in which bones become dead objects and so are allowed to circulate as "specimens" and objects of collection as Cormack packs them off to his old professor in Edinburgh. If, as Gordon (1997) and others have argued, the condition of postcoloniality is one in which we have repressed and excluded memories of those others who have the capacity to interrogate claims to sovereignty from our waking consciousness, then these repressed memories necessarily return to us in dreams. And if one mechanism of this repression is a system of narration by which the traces of the living presence of those others are constituted as dead objects, then return of the repressed takes the form of these objects animating and, in so doing, disrupting the very distinctions which order our waking consciousness: distinctions between the living and the dead and between the present and the past.

A Return to Red Indian Lake (or Oxen Pond)

The fact of the matter is, however, that it is not only in fictional dreams that the skulls of Nonosabasut and Demasduit animate and so come to haunt the present. Recently, there have been various attempts to discover in the form and substance of the skulls the traces of the living person and from these traces build upon and outward from the skulls to restore a visible quality of presence, in the form of a living, or as-if-living, human face. (Black, Marshall, et al. 2009; Kuch, Gröcke, et al. 2007)

Specifically, there has been a documentary film made and completed during the time of my fieldwork in Newfoundland. Entitled "Stealing Mary" (Wolochatiuk 2006). It is styled as a forensic investigation into the deaths of

Demasduit and Nonosabasut out on the ice of Red Indian Lake. One part of this forensic investigation was a reconstruction of the face of Nonosabasut from the skull undertaken by Richard Neave. Actually, as previously mentioned, and much to Mr. Neave's irritation, it was from a plastic model of the skull, but regardless as the filming progressed so the work of building Nonosabasut's face progressed, as points were fixed on the model of the skull and clay was layered upon these points and a face moulded and a wig placed upon the clay head. For Richard Neave, at least as he was quoted in the film, this process of reconstruction was, to some degree, a process of reanimating the dead material of bone. In his words, he hoped to

“... bring this skull, if you like, this person, this persona back to life.

It is a bit romantic to say we're trying to breathe life into those remains but to some extent that is what we are trying to do.”

(Wolochatiuk 2006)

This “bringing to life” was precisely a matter of presence, of recognising the human, living presence of a man long dead, a presence that is both inherent in and occluded by the materiality of bone. When asked in a later conversation what effect he wished to achieve by giving his reconstructions a lively animate quality, Richard said that he wished for people to

“go away recognising, understanding, that the people who lived, the remains of the people that they see, were just like themselves.; basically different times, but basically like themselves with the same sets of feeling.. To enable them to realise that they were people doing what we do. They were surviving. They were

breeding ... Nothing peculiar about them. Those bones are not what they were.”

It was not just the face of a long dead Beothuk man that was being reconstructed for the film. As Richard Neave worked away in Manchester, re-enactments of the fateful encounter on the ice of Red Indian Lake were being filmed in Newfoundland. In truth it was not Red Indian Lake where the filming was taking place, it being rather remote, but Oxen Pond, a small lake just on the outskirts of St. John's. Nonetheless, the re-enactment of Nonoabasut's murder and Demasduit's kidnap seemed to both call forth and be haunted by the presence of the Beothuk. Most uncanny of a series of uncanny events (including a pond that stayed frozen while others thawed and cracked) was the appearance of man cast in the role of Nonosabasut, a local Mi'kmaq artist by the name of Jerry Evans. Though cast well before the reconstruction of the face was finished it seemed to Marian White, a producer on the film, that Jerry's face greatly resembled that of Nonosabasut, heavy and somber, as if in him the dead man had been made into living flesh or, in the words of Marian, he “took on the spirit of Nonosabasut”.

This was, above all else, a *feeling* of presence that was evinced in the mood of all those participating in the filming on that day out of the ice. As Beni Malone, who worked with Marian, recalls,

“the shooting of it was incredibly emotional ... I mean you see young guys joking and having a beer and stuff, and all of a sudden they start shooting the thing. And they would have to stop and move away and they would have to recompose themselves and get back on, and do it again, you know. It got, like, it got tangible.”

Jerry Evans, he whose face so much resembled the reconstructed face of Nonosabasut, was particularly moved.

“When they did that scene on the ice, and the Peytons were coming and they took Demasduit. ... It was a re-enactment. I don’t know how factual it was, or whatever. But I became overwhelmed. I broke out. I cried. They told me what to do, to call out their name and to plead with the Peytons and the other guys there, you know, I wanted her back, I started crying, I was overwhelmed. And when it was done, when one of the guys said ‘cut’, everybody were, I mean it wasn’t just me that was crying. There were other people crying too, you know. So it really effected me too, you know.”

This quality of affective presence, described in a shift to sombre mood and the tears of cast and crew, was, I would argue, and to paraphrase Beni Malone, a matter of the experiential quality of past lives becoming “tangible”, as the “dead” matter of the past became animated as a living face, as running bodies, as a fringe of forest and a hard frozen sheet of ice. In this those involved came into touch with the past lives of Nonosabasut and Demasduit, not as narratives but as a quality of experience which blurred the distinctions between past and present, between real and re-enacted events, between the living and the dead – much as Jerry’s face uncannily resembled the face of Nonosabasut that had been built from clay upon a model of skull, that had, in turn, been created by scanning the real skull, which sits in the stores of the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh.

Conclusion (absence)

There was a final element to Cormack's fictional dream of colonial guilt. This was the "dark eyes in an ancient face" that "watched from the shadows", a lingering, un-defined yet tangible sense of a presence, which was not wholly immaterial yet never wholly materialised, either as a full and recognisable face of clay or flesh or, for that matter, as a skull. Nonosabasut and Demasduit were, it seems, never wholly present, even as a face was built upon a model of the skull and became animate as their story was filmed on the ice of Oxen Pond. Even as we try, through various materialisations to make them present, and so feel them close with us, a feeling that moves us to tears, their presence is always deferred.

This deferral is not a "non-presence", a state which, as Domaska argues, animates projects to "presentify" the past (through, for example, facial reconstruction or historical re-enactments), rather, it is a matter of non-absence. Domasńska describes "non-absence" as follows,

The category of the *non-absent past* (the past whose absence is manifest), however, seems more interesting. Based on double negation, it acquires positive meaning (two minuses equal a plus). By focusing on it we avoid the desire to presentify and represent the past, and instead we turn to a past that is somehow still present, that will not go away or, rather, that of which we cannot rid ourselves. (2006: 346)

Nonosabasut and Demasduit are not made present in their skulls. In their skulls they are "non-absent". It is a past that will not go away, but neither will it come wholly to us and so allow for resolution. It is precisely in their insufficient and excessive quality of "thingyness" that their skulls possess the

capacity to both animate and unsettle our relationship to the past; for in their materiality, they do not simply allow for but also resist the process of their becoming as social objects. Demasduit and Nonosabasut may be made known through their skulls, but they also remain unknown.

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